Naming of 'Freedom Ring'

By Morton Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

The American Telephone & Telegraph Co. has suggested to its affiliates throughout the Nation that they make available to the public the names of the hitherto anonymous sponsors of right-wing "Let Freedom Ring" phone messages.

This should mitigate the possibilities of abuse and "should facilitate recourse to the courts by those who consider themselves defamed," the Bell System has told the Federal Communications Commission.

The messages, recorded at frequent intervals, are recited by automatic equipment that answers when well-advertised phone numbers are dialed. The equipment is the same as that used for time and weather reports.

Until now, phone companies have refused to give out the names of so-called unpublished subscribers.

Last month, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish fraternal organization, complained to the Federal Communications Commission that this anonymity enabled libelous "Let Freedom Ring" statements to be made with impunity.

Similar complaints were made by the National Council of Churches to the FCC and, on the Senate floor, by Sens. Gale W. McGee (D-Wyo.), Russell B. Long (D-La.) and Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.).

Responding to the League's complaint, AT&T said names and addresses of subscribers to the automatic announcement service would be given out as promptly as possible on request.

"We deplore the use of our facilities for the dissemination of disparaging remarks," said

Sponsors Urged

AT&T assistant vice president Richard W. Miller.

Among those disparaged by what the League called an "extremist propaganda operation" have been customary targets of the right wing, including the National Council of Churches, Parent-Teachers Associations, the Supreme Court, the United Nations, Presidents of the United States, members of Congress and the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Let Freedom Ring" was founded three years ago by Dr. William Campbell Douglass of Sarasota, Fla., a member of the John Birch Society.

In a phone interview yesterday, the physician said that the messages prepared by his organization (and locally, also) are now distributed in more than 50 cities to 30,000 to 50,000 listeners daily, but not in the Washington area. He said that in some cities as many as 10 automatic announcing machines are used.

Dr. Douglass termed the ATT action "asinine," insisting that anyone saying he has been libeled can go to the courts, which can order disclosure of the names of sponsors. "No one in three years has sued me," he said.

The Anti-Defamation League said, however, that while it welcomes the Bell System decision as "just and sound," it still needs additional remedial action.

This would be a requirement that every "propaganda message (include) the name and address of the true and actual sponsor." AT&T told the FCC that such a requirement would place an undue burden on subscribers who do not engage in criticized activities.